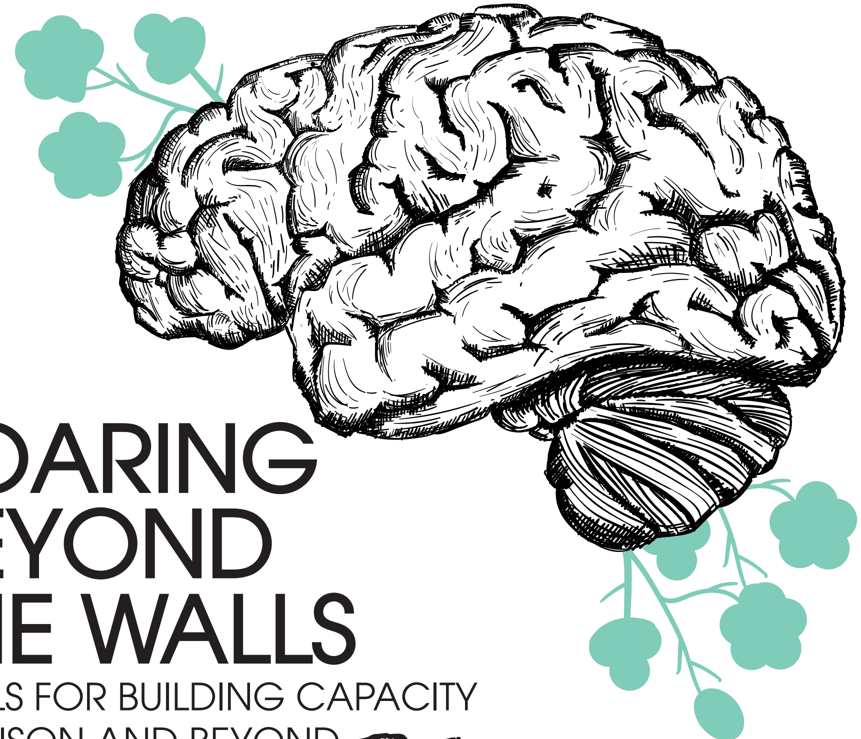
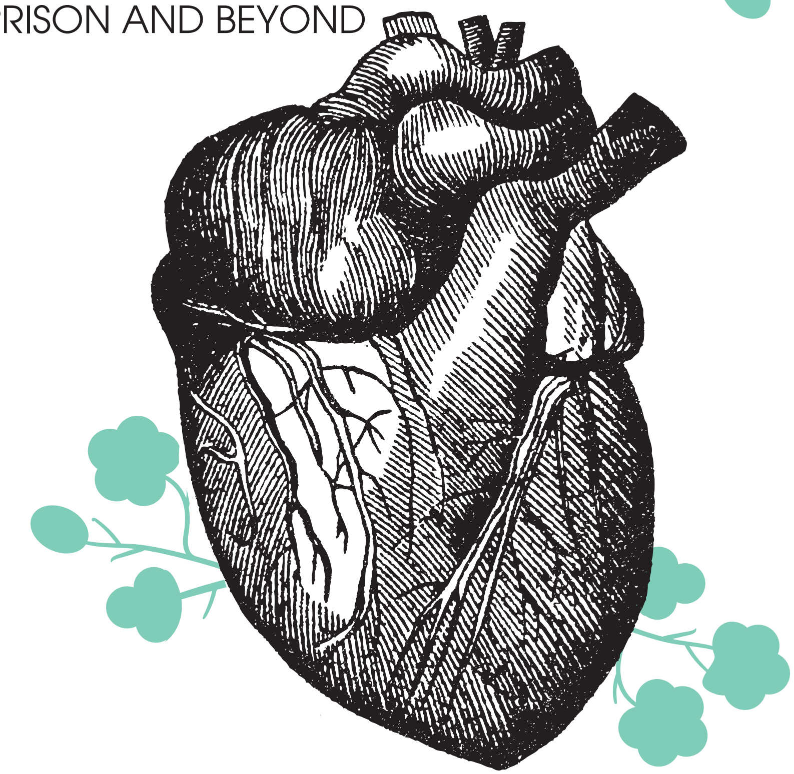


SOARING BEYOND THE WALLS

TOOLS FOR BUILDING CAPACITY IN PRISON AND BEYOND



2018

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While the information and exercises posed here have been extremely useful tools for me, you may not find these specific tools personally speak to you, and that is fine too. When I began learning about these practices nearly ten years ago, I was definitely resistant to how strange and uncomfortable the exercises felt. You may feel discomfort or confusion at first and that is to be expected. In building a connection to what my body is saying and holding, I've found a greater capacity to sustain living counter to the ways in which our society functions. My relationship to myself, as well as my interactions with others, feel and go better. A connection between our mind and our body can be helpful in handling how oppressive the world can be. Just know you're not alone out there.

When the brain is trying to regulate the body, it needs information about what is happening in the arms and legs. Awareness and capacity building are good but won't necessarily be effective on their own if there is long-term trauma which has caused the messages from the brain to the arms and legs to be blocked.

Movement overrides the brain's overthinking and gives the brain new data. A lot of people feel a return of vibrancy or aliveness during these exercises. Still a variety of feelings may arise while you are doing these exercises such as discomfort, excitement, embarrassment, empowerment or uncertainty. A diffucult feeling is not a sign that things aren't working. Any fear or emotional discomfort that arises should be manageable. If it is not manageable, switch to a different movement and notice how it becomes more manageable.

Musculature is very involved in creating emotional states. The more connection our brain has to our arm and leg muscles, the more space and capacity it will have for managing emotional states.

LEG EXERCISES TO HELP BUILD CONNECTION BETWEEN THE LEGS AND THE BRAIN

1. MOVE YOUR LEGS, ONE AT A TIME, TO THE SIDE.
   This helps with centering in your life.

2. PUSH YOUR HEELS INTO THE GROUND, ONE AT A TIME.
   This uses muscles involved in standing on your own two feet + standing your ground.

3. LIFT YOUR LEGS, ONE AT A TIME, BENDING AT THE KNEE. THEN PLACING BACK ON THE GROUND.
   This helps with boundary development.

4. MOVE YOUR LEGS, ONE AT A TIME, BACK BEHIND YOU.
   This is involved in moving forward in life.

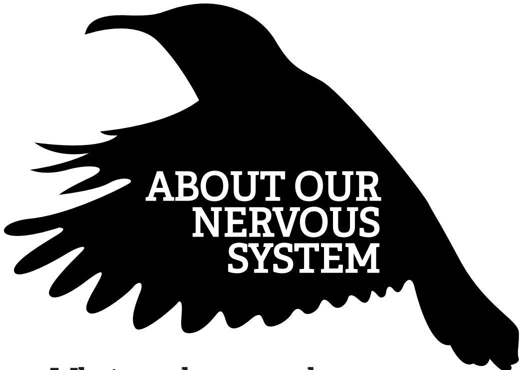
5. STANDING UP, SCRUNCH YOUR TOES DOWN. PAUSE. LIFT YOUR TOES UP. REPEAT.
   This uses muscles involved in grounding + reality testing.



It can be brutal trying to survive in this society. From the daily grind of life under capitalism and navigating our interactions with the people around us to finding ourselves locked up or undergoing state repression — these tools can help build our capacity to sustain the difficult and sometimes unbearable situations we find ourselves in.

Connection to what our body is telling us is undervalued in our culture. We overthink everything. Yet, awareness of our body and it's sensations can be a resource for us in times of stress. Since our brains shut off under stress, being connected to what our body is telling us can help us make decisions and act easier when faced with stressors.

The exercises and tools within this zine are intended to help us gain a deeper sense of what our bodies are holding and what they are telling us. This understanding can help build new pathways in the brain, as well as muscle memories of movement, that can be accessed by the body during potentially stressful situations. Being able to notice our body's sensations and pay attention to what it is telling us allows us to make more clear decisions in times of stress and recover afterwards too.



ABOUT OUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

What can happen when we are under excessive stress?

When we experience excessive stress—whether from internal worry or external circumstance—a bodily reaction is triggered, called the "fight or flight" response. Originally discovered by a physiologist Walter Cannon, this response is hard-wired into our brains and helps protect us from bodily harm. This response actually corresponds to an area of our brain called the hypothalamus, which—when stimulated— initiates a sequence of nerve cell firing and chemical release that prepares our body for fighting or fleeing.

What is the "fight or flight response?"

The fight or flight response is our body's primitive, automatic, inborn response that prepares the body to "fight" or "flee" from perceived attack, harm or threat to our survival.

What signs signify our fight or flight response has been activated?

When our fight or flight response is activated, sequences of nerve cell firing occur and chemicals like adrenaline and cortisol are released into our bloodstream. These patterns of nerve cell firing and chemical release cause our body to undergo a series of very dramatic changes.

In preparation for fight or flight, blood comes away from both the digestive tract and the limbs, for example, to move more blood toward the heart and lungs. This elevates the heart rate and increases oxygen through quick, shallow breaths. These responses occur in preparation for a spurt of energy to the muscles and limbs. Yet, because we live in a world where we generally don't or can't fight or flee, energy tends to remain stored in our body without having been expelled.

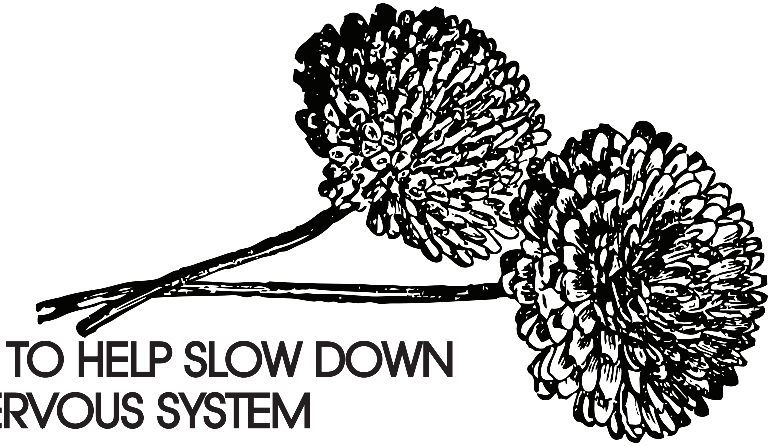
When our fight or flight system is activated, we tend to perceive everything in our environment as a possible threat. Under stress, the cognitive part of our brain goes offline. We still react as if there are tigers ready to attack us when it may be the sound of fireworks, for example. This, along with holding on to all the preparatory energy, is what creates such chronic anxiety and panic.

When our brains are not functioning under stress, a connection our body gives us options for action. In gaining more access to our limbs, our system feels that the response has been completed and the body is safe. This is why settling is quite helpful so that our body processes can return to a balanced state.

What is our fight or flight system designed to protect us from?

Our fight or flight response is designed to protect us from the proverbial saber tooth tigers that once lurked in the woods and fields

CONTINUE ON NEXT PAGE



TOOLS TO HELP SLOW DOWN THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

ORIENTING

Stopping to notice your surroundings, move your eyes and neck around to scan the room, to take note of 1 or 2 things in the room that are visually pleasing. Use your imagination to create something beautiful if you can't see anything – to focus on the form it takes, to return to the item(s) over and over. This can help with grounding and create more space in your body. Orienting helps you deactivate when stress arises. It allows for awareness of your surroundings and the settling of your self. It allows your system to let go and recognize that you are not under immediate threat and thus more easily move through whatever tension you may be holding.

BODY SCAN

Try to notice and pay attention to the neutral or positive sensations as you scan down your body, from your head to your toes, or visa versa. If you tend to hold stress in your shoulders, see if your legs or your hands might be more neutral. If you hold stress in your chest, try placing a hand there to help give it some support.

As you scan, try to notice any sensations such as warm or solid or calm. Maybe a color arises when you think of the neutral or positive area. You can try to give any openness a size or shape with descriptive words. This can help us notice places in our body where we have space in order to access these places when we feel stressed or trapped. Awareness to space in our body gives us options of how to respond under stress.

The goal is to build the ability to move back and forth between chronic stress and neutrality to create the foundation of the nervous system to be able to break the chronic stress pattern and return to a more resilient and varied response pattern – not just in times of stress.

SEE PAGE 3 FOR ANOTHER EXAMPLE

WHEN OUT OF THE BLUE WE STARTLE AND PERCEIVE THREAT, OUR BODIES THEN THINK WE ARE UNDER ATTACK AND REACT TO DEFEND OURSELVES — THEY STIFFEN, FREEZE, COLLAPSE, FIGHT OR FLEE. THESE EMERGENCY REACTIONS ARE MEANT TO BE TEMPORARY, BUT WHAT HAPPENS IN TRAUMA IS OUR BODIES AND BRAINS BECOME STUCK — OUR NECKS STIFFEN, OUR STOMACH GOES INTO KNOTS, OUR HEART BEATS WILDLY OR ALTERNATIVELY, WE COLLAPSE INTO HELPLESSNESS. WE DON'T KNOW HOW TO RETURN TO A BALANCED STATE AFTER DANGER PASSES.

THESE ARE ALL THINGS OUR BODIES IMMEDIATELY DO TO INSTINCTIVELY DEFEND AND PROTECT OURSELVES FROM THE INITIAL AND ACTUAL THREAT. BUT WHEN THIS REACTION BECOMES CHRONIC, WE DEVELOP THE DEBILITATING SYMPTOMS OF TRAUMA AND OUR BODIES CONTINUE TO SIGNAL TO OUR BRAINS THAT WE ARE IN DANGER, AND HENCE WE CAN PERCEIVE THREAT WHERE IT DOES NOT EXIST. UNTIL WE ARE ABLE TO CHANGE THE INTERNAL SENSE OF OUR BODIES, WE HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO REMAIN TRAUMATIZED.

THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT POSES MANY THREATS TO OUR SAFETY. IT'S POTENTIALLY CHALLENGING TO BE ABLE TO DISTINGUISH WHICH SITUATIONS NECESSITATE A FIGHT RESPONSE AND WHICH SITUATIONS ARE JUST A MANAGEABLE CONFLICT. A FIGHT RESPONSE IS NECESSARY WHEN A CO SEEKS TO EXERT POWER OVER US. YET AT OTHER TIMES, EVEN WHILE IT FEELS AS THOUGH WE ARE UNDER ATTACK BY A TIGER, IN REALITY WE ARE JUST HAVING A NORMAL CONFLICT WITHIN A MUTUAL RELATIONSHIP. DEVELOPING THESE TOOLS CAN HELP US LEARN THE DIFFERENCE AND MAKE ADAPTING TO LIFE ON THE OUTSIDE EASIER.

IT'S CRUCIAL TO REMEMBER THAT AN INAPPROPRIATE FIGHT RESPONSE COULD LEAD TO HURTING PEOPLE IT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE TO HURT.



around us, threatening our physical survival. At times when our actual physical survival is threatened, there is no greater response to have on our side. When activated, the fight or flight response causes a surge of adrenaline and other stress hormones to pump through our body.

What are the saber tooth tigers of today, and why are they so dangerous?

When we face very real dangers to our physical survival, the fight or flight response is invaluable. If we are locked up, our physical safety is constantly in jeopardy and so our fight or flight response may continually be heightened. Sometimes, however, the saber tooth tigers we encounter are not a threat to our physical survival. Nonetheless, these modern day tigers trigger the activation of our fight or flight system, as if our physical survival was threatened. On a daily basis, toxic stress hormones flow into our bodies for events that pose no real threat to our physical survival.

Has the fight or flight response become counterproductive?

In most cases today, once our fight or flight response is activated, we cannot flee. We cannot fight. We cannot physically run from our perceived threats. The decision making part of the brain is no longer functional. We are in survival mode, which is often not helpful to us. Many of the major stresses today trigger the full activation of our fight or flight response, causing us to become hypervigilant and over-reactive, which can cause us to act or respond in ways that are actually counter-productive to our survival.

Why is it helpful to focus on the body when under stress?

The more we know how to bring awareness to our bodies, the more we will be able to gain information from our body to use in situations of actual stress when our brain has gone offline. When we think we are under threat, our brain can no longer function to make decisions. Having access to the space in our body can allow us to assess the threat level and either respond in the way we would like to or return to an emotionally balanced state once the threat has passed.

To protect ourselves today, we must consciously pay attention to the signals of fight or flight.

To protect ourselves in a world of sometimes psychological — rather than physical — danger, we must consciously pay attention to unique signals telling us whether we are actually in fight or flight. Some of us may experience these signals as physical symptoms like tension in our muscles, headache, upset stomach, racing heartbeat, deep sighing or shallow breathing. Others may experience them as emotional or psychological symptoms such as

CONTINUE ON PAGE 3





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anxiety, poor concentration, depression, hopelessness, frustration, anger, sadness or fear.

Excess stress does not always show up as the "feeling" of being stressed. Many stresses go directly into our physical body and may only be recognized by the physical symptoms we manifest. Two excellent examples of stress-induced conditions are "eye twitching" and "teeth-grinding." Conversely, we may "feel" lots of emotional stress in our emotional body and have very few physical symptoms or signs in our body.

By recognizing the symptoms and signs of being in fight or flight, we can begin to take steps to handle the stress overload. There are benefits to being in fight or flight — even when the threat is psychological rather than physical. For example, in times of emotional jeopardy, the fight or flight response can sharpen our mental acuity, thereby helping us deal decisively with issues, moving us to action. But it can also make us hypervigilant and over-reactive during times when a state of calm awareness is more productive.

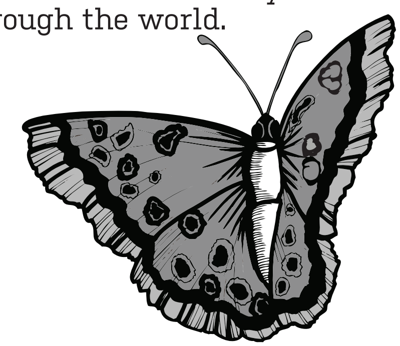
By learning to recognize the signals of fight or flight activation, we can avoid reacting excessively to events and fears that are not life threatening. In so doing, we can play "emotional judo" with our fight or flight response, using its energy to help us rather than harm us. We can borrow the beneficial effects (heightened awareness, mental acuity and the ability to tolerate excess pain) in order to change our emotional environment and deal productively with our fears, thoughts and potential dangers.

A TOOL TO HELP SLOW DOWN THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

SEE PAGE 10 FOR OTHER EXAMPLES

VISUALIZATIONS

Using imagery can help you orient and recognize the separation between your body and danger. Use an imagine of a string on the ground in a circle that you can stand within or a neon yellow cloud encircling your body to help create a boundary for yourself. Bring shape and colors to help form your boudary. You can access it at any time when stressors arise. Your imagination can be an incredible resource. You can imagine an animal present with you within your boundary when you need it or beside you at all times as you move through the world.



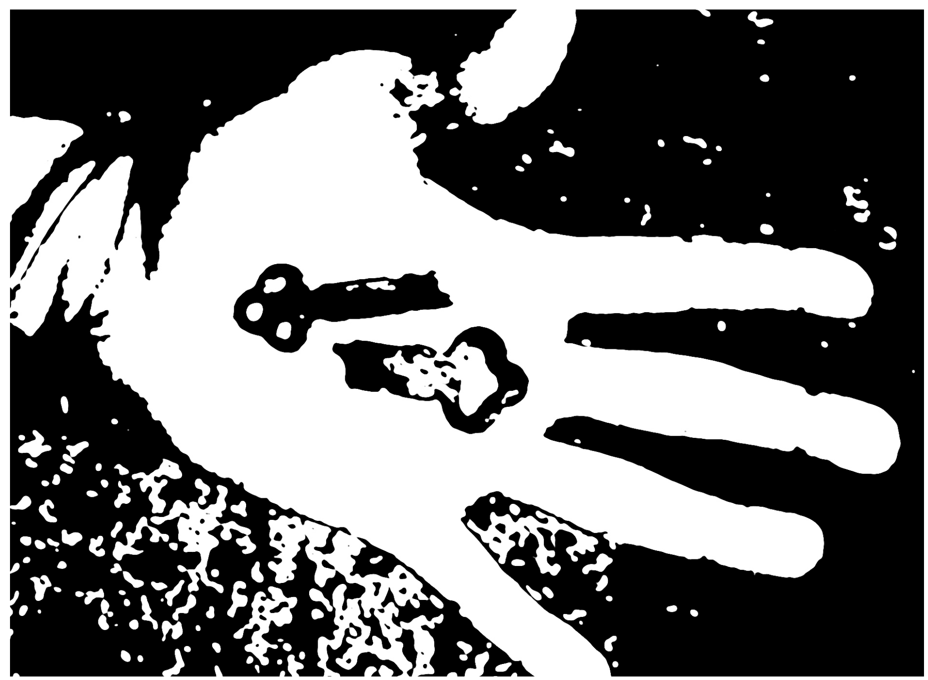
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If you awake during the night, remind yourself of who you are and where you are. Look around the room and notice objects and name them. Feel the bed you are lying on, the warmth or coldness of the air, and notice any sounds you hear. Feel the clothes on your body, whether your arms & legs are covered or not, and the sensation of your clothes as you move in them.

If you are lying down, feel the contact between your head, your body & your legs, as they touch the surface you are lying on. Starting from your head, notice how each part feels, all the way down to your feet, on the soft or hard surface.

Get up, walk around, take your time to notice each step as you take one then another, your toes pushing into the ground.

If you feel comfortable, stamp your feet, noticing the sensation and sound as you connect with the ground. Clap and rub your hands together, hear the noise and feel the sensation in your hands and arms.





EXERCISES TO HELP GROUND AND ORIENT

These grounding and orienting exercises work better if practiced regularly for about 2 to 3 months in order to create the habit. Remembering grounding exercises in a moment of stress or panic is more difficult if it is not something we do on a regular basis. Go easy on yourself. Any amount that feels good can help.

Remind yourself of who you are. Say your name. Say your age. Say where you are now. Say what you have done today. Say what you will do next. If comfortable, say these things aloud.

Take ten breaths, focusing your attention on the inhale & the exhale. Say the number of the breaths to yourself.

Look around the room and name objects you see, first the large and then smaller ones. Be mindful of your breath deepening as you orient to your surroundings.

As you sit, feel the chair or ground under you and the weight of your body & legs pressing down onto and against it. Notice the way the chair holds you. Press your hands down into your legs or put a hand on your chest to help give it support.

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Like other mammals, we enter a state of attention at the sound of a snapping twig or a shadow passing overhead. And while other mammals shake or discharge in some way and subsequently return to a balanced state, we don't always settle into relaxation and emotional balance when danger passes, and we need tools to help us.

THE CYCLE FOR HOW THE BODY GETS COMPLETION WHEN ACTIVATED

STARTLE & SETTLE

We hear the snap of a twig and the body is activated for a threat response cycle. Our system is set for alarm. We look around to see if there is a potential threat.

If we see it was just a squirrel in the bushes, the body releases and the cycle ends. We return to a balanced state.

Or if we are able to make a social connection with someone and not feel alone, for example, then this too can allow us to return to relative homeostasis.

STARTLE & ACTIVATION

When we hear the snap of a twig and we cannot orient to safety – when we cannot see the source of a mysterious noise, for example – then a fight, flight or freeze response occurs. We attack, run or shut down.

This occurs many times throughout the day in all sorts of interactions, like when you feel overwhelmed in a conversation with someone or you hear a loud noise or because of the fact that you are locked up and without very much control over your environment.

We can react to outside stressors as if they are tigers about to eat us, which is an animal response that can make functioning on a day to day basis more difficult.

Animals continually experience this cycle of alertness to threat, in which they then naturally run or shake, and then return again to homeostasis.

As humans we have to make a conscious effort to complete the cycle. We have to intentionally orient to the relative safety, discharge any built up stress we may have held in our bodies and integrate the reality that now we are relatively safe.

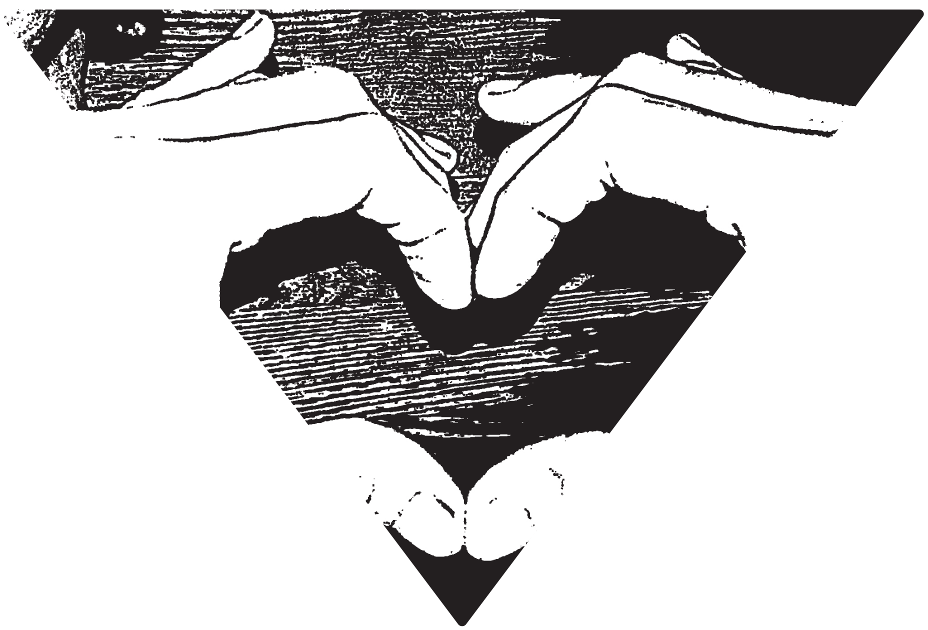
Hopefully some of these tools can help build your capacity for stressful times. Unfortunately, sometimes we are in situations where there is no safety to be found. You have everything you need inside yourself to fight back from a grounded state of mind and body.

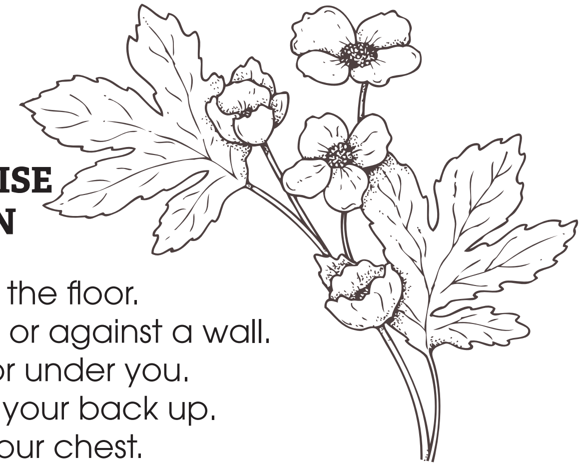
ABOUT GROUNDING

Grounding exercises are a way for you to firmly anchor yourself in the present. It is useful to have a selection of grounding exercises that you can draw upon to keep your mind and body connected and working together, particularly for those times when you become overwhelmed with distressing thoughts, feelings or memories.

This technique helps us reorient to the here-and-now and bring us into the present. Grounding can be a useful practice if you ever feel overwhelmed, intensely anxious or dissociated from your environment.

The following grounding exercises are about using all our senses to build our mind and body connection in the present. In working through these exercises, you might find one or two that work for you. Remember to only use the exercises that you feel comfortable with.





GROUNDING EXERCISE TO CALM YOU DOWN

Place both feet flat on the floor.
Lean back into a chair or against a wall.
Notice the chair or floor under you.
Notice what is holding your back up.
Cross your arms over your chest.
Gently tap your shoulder, alternating one side at a time.
Notice your breath deepening.

Shoulder tapping is most effective, but sometimes it feels more comfortable to tap your thighs instead.

GROUNDING EXERCISE TO RELIEVE ANXIETY

The "54321 game" is a common sensory awareness grounding exercise that you may find to be a helpful tool for relaxation or getting through difficult moments. It may work well for insomnia, anxiety or general relaxation.

1. Name 5 things you see in the room. Describe them.
2. Name 4 things you can feel.
   ("My feet on the floor." or "The air in my nose.")
3. Name 3 things you like about yourself.
4. Name 2 sounds you hear.
5. Name 1 good smell right now.

At any point, you can access your imagination if you find yourself without anything around you. Repeat the 5 steps more than once, if needed. Try out the technique in different situations.